

Navistar, LPGA, state see partnership grow

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PRATTVILLE -- Navistar announced last month a two-year extension to continue sponsoring the LPGA tournament here at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail through 2012 -- making a marriage of six years between the diesel technology leader and women's professional golfers.

From the start it appeared to be an unlikely relationship, but one that continues to flourish, including this year with the tournament wrapping up today.

"A number of years ago, I tried to con him (Navistar President and CEO Daniel Ustian) into this thing and he was like a cat on the floor," said David Bronner, head of the Retirement Systems of Alabama who gave birth to the state's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. "He said this is sort of crazy. Here I am a great company out of Chicago. Why do I really want to do anything in Alabama, much less a golf tournament?"

The first year, tournament director Jonathan Romeo was thinking the same thing.

"When we heard of a heavy truck company sponsoring an LPGA tournament, we didn't get it," Romeo said. "Then, we get to see the response of the people that come back every single year and you know we are doing something right.

"The reason they are sponsoring this tournament is pure business. It's to sell trucks. They want to sell trucks. We wondered at first who was going to play in the pro-am? Then we had 50 spots and 70 people wanted to play. Then, we had 80 spots and 120 wanted to play. It allowed us to create these additional spots to fill the needs of everybody."

Personal playground

With the ideal weather, temperatures ranging in the mid-50s to upper 80s this week, a resort hotel, 54 holes of championship golf and quality food, it creates the ideal environment for Navistar to build relationships and maintain and create new business opportunities.

"Relationship building is the key," said David Droll of Navistar marketing. "We manufacture large capital goods and you can't sell something like that unless you have a great relationship with people."

Navistar brings in two waves of clients: one group from Monday to Thursday and another group from Thursday afternoon through Sunday. This year it included a total of 200 guests from all over the world, including Mexico, South America, South Africa, Australia, Denmark and Europe.

There were three different sectors of Navistar business represented with various gatherings and parties: the complex diesel engine business (where many people toured the diesel plant in Huntsville on Tuesday), one for the Monaco RV business and the third for trucks.

The tournament added a third pro-am to the schedule this year.

The new one was on Monday with 60 people, to go along with the "official" pro-am of more than 230 on Wednesday and a third pro-am held Saturday morning on the Judge course with players who did not make the cut in the LPGA tournament with roughly 100 people.

The players who play in the Saturday pro-am are given an appearance fee.

"Having three pro-ams allows a company to entertain three times as many people as they would normally," Romeo said. "It's a good thing and a business-wise decision. Navistar has everything they want right here. They can play rounds with their buddies, play in the pro-ams ... all within 500 yards of where they are sleeping. That's what makes this site so attractive.

Even the groups LPGA pro-am partners are paired with are carefully thought out.

"The LPGA players are appreciative," Romeo said. "They understand. They have a job and this course is their office. Then they play in the pro-ams and entertain and make a pretty cool living that way doing what we would pay to do.

"All that goes into who is in the Monday or Wednesday pro-am from a customer standpoint. If I know this guy is from Texas and Kim Hall is from Texas, that's a good connection. With the LPGA you learn all players are good at pro-ams. Some personalities from an amateur standpoint are more natural and are good matches."

The players in each of the pro-ams, those who pay to play, other corporate sponsors and Navistar clients, are all treated to shopping experiences to go with their rounds of golf.

The pro-ams are not the only golf being played by Navistar clients. The Legislator and the Judge courses have organized group and casual outings every day of the week.

The courses are always in top condition, but a full-court press is applied leading up to the event. As an example, Capitol Hill director of golf course maintenance Robert Wingo said the courses go from being mowed three days a week to every day.

Capitol Hill director of golf Mike Beverly said there are superintendents from other RTJ Golf Trail facilities mowing greens when "they are a little overqualified for that."

"Everything is ready for those guys," Wingo said. "The other two courses are just as important as the Senator in these two weeks."

Professional help

Navistar clients also are afforded the opportunity to get help on their games.

This year, Navistar bought in nationally known short game coach Stan Utley and representatives from the Dave Pelz golf schools to teach guests. PGA golf pro Chris Walkey also was back at the driving range offering all-day instruction from whoever requested it.

Walkey, who has been a teaching pro for 20 years, is currently working with LPGA players Jennifer Johnson and Mhairi McKay, both of whom played here this week. He said he usually sees 30-40 in each wave of Navistar clients and said most of them get pretty excited if they can gain something to help them.

"It's just knowing how to give to them a more enjoyable round," Walkey said. "No matter what you teach, ball flight is the key. Tweaking grip, set-up -- if you make the ball flight better, they are going to get better results. I get people coming back and thanking me. It happens all the time."

Golf isn't the only opportunity Navistar provides to its clients throughout the week.

There were groups that went bass fishing and skeet shooting. There was also a tour of Montgomery's Blount Cultural Park on Saturday. Beverly said Navistar always tries to "make it different each year for the guests that are returning."

On Friday night, Cristie Kerr, the leader of the tournament, came over to a Navistar dinner and she spoke about her new wine, Curvature, made by Pride Mountain Vineyards in Napa Valley.

On Saturday night, Navistar treated its clients to a dinner on the bluff overlooking downtown Montgomery near the first tee of the Judge course and Kevin Eubanks' band, formerly on the "Tonight" show, performed.

How well it works

Droll said they would sit down and debrief next month and determine areas where Navistar can improve. He said some portion of his work schedule year-round is devoted to thinking about the tournament with the final 90 days leading up to the event taking a "significant portion of my time."

But the extensive effort produces results.

"I can't tell you how difficult it is to make a decision, not just the financial resources, but the commitment to be here," Ustian said. "But we make that decision based on what is good for us and what is good for the community. And, as well as the past year has gone, I say 'How can it get better than that?'"

"But for us, as I mentioned, we have to pay that back somehow with the engagements with the relationships that we establish, not just within the state, but with our customers, our suppliers and our other business partners, and it has

been an incredible story for us."

A prime example came after last year's tournament when Navistar signed a supply agreement with J.B. Hunt for Navistar to be their principal provider of International brand commercial trucks through 2014.

"I'll give you one example, and it's a high-end example, but these are the kinds of things we accomplish while we are here," Ustian said. "We sell trucks, a lot of them, school buses, diesel engines but it is a very difficult time. The industry is down 75 percent. We have many customers that visit with us here and it's tough for us to get them engaged enough for them to take three days off to come here.

"And we convinced one that happens to be J.B. Hunt, and we all know who they are, and we had not done business with J.B. Hunt for a dozen years. So we got the president of the company to spend some time with us, and of course he played some golf, but you also got that communication, that trust, that engagement going on and two weeks later we got an order for \$500 million."

Clients want to be invited back

Jim Harris, who is the CEO of Harris Trucking Co. near Lynchburg, Va., has been one of Navistar's invited clients each of the last four years. He said he can't wait until the tournament rolls around each year.

Harris purchases trucks from Navistar. His company is a truck load carrier that hauls east of the Mississippi River with different locations spread throughout Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina. He said he loves the golf, but there is so much more to it than that.

"I think it just keeps getting better and better and better," Harris said. "It just works so much smoother through the local people, through the Navistar people ... everyone just does a great job ... they treat everybody so well ... we're royal."

"I give a lot of credit to the state and the community because you walk on this property and they treat you with respect," Ustian said. "They know what their job is, and most of these people are volunteers, so it's incredible to be associated with that. Those are the little things that make the difference."

He said Navistar has its work cut out for it to make next year's event better this year's.

"That's the objective," Ustian said. "To be in an environment relaxed, enjoying themselves, some business, but when they go home they really remember their experience here and sign up early ... and say 'Don't forget about us next year.'"

"The toughest thing for us is now we are trying to add some and the people here this year want to come back and now we have to make that decision on how many we can bring. I know this year we brought in more than last year.

"I try to temper my own expectations because it has been so perfect and it's hard for me to picture how it will be better, but then guys like David will find tweaks that will make it even better."